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# An Exploration into Project Management: A Grassroots Experience in a Developing Nation

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## **An Exploration into Project Management:**

### **A Grassroots Experience in a Developing Nation – Lessons Learned**

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For several decades an important debate has raged on about the continued and ineffective efforts of the developed world to bring emergent nations out of poverty by way of developmental aid. Newscasts are often riddled with the success stories and horror stories of philanthropists and aid organizations in their efforts to “help,” so the question becomes, what makes the difference? In an effort to best understand the do’s and don’ts of developmental aid, one must look at the constants of effective initiatives and recognize the necessity of such components to any project. Without the benefits of grassroots participation, sustainable planning, and lasting partnerships, it is likely an initiative will flounder and may even cause more harm than good.

At the most basic level, grassroots involvement entails working with a community at the local level where those involved are directly affected by a project or initiative. For example, when building a school in an impoverished area, those who live in the area and

who will be attending the school would be directly involved with the planning and location of that institution. When grassroots involvement is taken away, the voice of those for whom the project is conducted is no longer heard and even those with the best intentions may cause harm without that insight. Any number of mistakes can occur without grassroots involvement. In our proposed scenario, what if the school is built at a distance that is prohibitive for children to attend, or what if a primary school was needed, when a secondary school was provided? The best aid comes from a clear and nuanced understanding of need. In any endeavor to provide developmental aid, those who will be recipients of such aid need to be directly involved with the planning, orchestration, and administration of any project.

One of the many avoidable pitfalls of developmental aid is minimizing the degree to which a community is involved in a project. The first step to providing aid is to work with a community in order to find out which problems need to be addressed. More precisely, one must work with locals in order to best determine *how* a problem should be addressed. It is imperative that those providing the aid assistance and those participants representing the affected community work together to combine their expertise and experience and create the most effective product. By marrying what each party has to offer, those mistakes that cause aid projects to be labeled as blunders can often be avoided. An example of this can be seen in something as simple as teaching farmers how to make cheese from goat's milk. In the United States and other developed nations simple farmer's cheeses are made using vinegar and cheesecloth, yet in many underdeveloped areas of the world such commodities may be unavailable. From the outsider's perspective, the simple solution may be to provide vinegar and cheesecloth to

farmers in order to continue the initiative. However, if one were to delve deeper into the insight of the community, it is likely that suitable alternatives are already available in the area. For example, many cultures use cloth that is similar in weight to a handkerchief, which coincidentally works nearly as well as a cheese cloth in straining whey from curds in the cheese-making process. In addition, lemons can often be used as a vinegar substitute, as can many other edible plants with acidic products. If those offering aid had given a hand-out like the cheesecloth, the project would only be able to encompass the number of people equal to the number of cheesecloths distributed. By using a material readily available and accessible to a larger portion of the community, the number of people affected by the initiative is likely to far outnumber those who would have been given the hand-out. In doing so, the knowledge of the aid workers involved, and the experience of the participants merges to benefit the largest number of people and establish the most effective product.

This scenario directly correlates to the idea of the sustainability of a project. For a project to be considered sustainable it must meet the needs of the present, while containing provisions that also address how the project will function in the future after exterior support has moved on. More simply, this means that those who receive the aid will continue to gain benefits from a project long after the initial support has been removed. The goal of any project should be that it eventually becomes self-sustaining. This means that project participants will need to be able to continue to run the previously established project, problem solve, and train others to retain knowledge gained with little or no help from the initial collaborators. In a scenario where a well has been dug for a community, a project would not be considered sustainable if those in the community were

unable to address future issues concerning the well. If the pump breaks, the water becomes contaminated, or the sides deteriorate the well would become useless unless someone of the recipient community was educated on how to address such problems. In addition, a sufficient number of people must be educated in order to promote retention of that knowledge. When only one person is an expert or has a specialty, the knowledge of that person is lost when he or she is removed from the community. This can be prevented by creating programs that empower committees or provide for extended education within the community. In other scenarios it is important to make sure that available resources will not be exhausted in the course of a project. The aforementioned example concerning goat's cheese is a perfect example of using sustainable resources by utilizing assets available to a community without the aid of exterior providers. In each scenario a problem is addressed in the community whereby the future of the materials or knowledge needed to further the endeavor is established within the recipient community.

The most beneficial projects, however, are those in which communities have continued support and create a mutually beneficial partnership for all of those involved. Partnerships promote trust and understanding amongst involved parties, thereby preventing any unintended animosity between differing participants, specifically those providing the aid and those receiving it. One of the largest hurdles aid organizations need to overcome is often the mistrust of outsiders by a community. Such mistrust may lead to misunderstandings, disagreements or noncooperation. Exchange of information amongst both parties is imperative for the success of any endeavor, however mistrust between aid workers and locals can often prevent full disclosure by either party. In such cases projects do not have grassroots support and may flounder in their objectives. By creating

lasting partnerships and objectives both parties gain mutual trust and are able to work together more cohesively. The snags and drawbacks of any initial or pilot project would thereby be avoided by working with communities that an aid organization has an established relationship with, or by working with other organizations that have well reputed presences in the area.

Developmental aid is given in a myriad of different ways to and by a myriad of different people around the globe. Although every project and people is different, the horror stories of developmental aid can be avoided by retaining these three principle platforms by which any initiative can be grounded. No one can understand the plights of those in impoverished nations better than those experiencing them. In order to be effective, developmental aid must work with those for whom it is designed, and help them to move forward out of poverty. The most effective developmental aid projects are not hand-outs, but rather help others to better their own lives. By utilizing grassroots participation, empowering those involved with sustainable programs, and providing lasting partnerships, it is possible for developmental aid programs to become success stories.